

Third Sunday of Advent

Year C



FIRST READING
Zephaniah 3:14–18

PSALM
Isaiah 12:2–6

SECOND READING
Philippians 4:4–7

GOSPEL
Luke 3:10–18

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PRAYER

Isaiah 12:2–6

Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD God is my strength
and my might;
he has become my salvation.
With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.
And you will say in that day:
Give thanks to the LORD,
call on his name;
make known his deeds
among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.
Sing praises to the LORD,
for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.
Shout aloud and sing for joy,
O royal Zion,
for great in your midst
is the Holy One of Israel.

READING THE WORD

First Reading Zephaniah 3:14–18

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult
with all your heart,

O daughter Jerusalem!
The Lord has taken away
the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the Lord,
is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
On that day
it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
The Lord, your God,
is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you
with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you
with loud singing
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear
reproach for it.

Second Reading Philippians 4:4–7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will
say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be
known to everyone. The Lord is near.
Do not worry about anything, but in
everything by prayer and supplica-
tion with thanksgiving let your re-
quests be made known to God. And
the peace of God, which surpasses
all understanding, will guard your
hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Gospel Luke 3:10–18

The crowds asked John the Baptist,
“What then should we do?” In re-
ply he said to them, “Whoever has
two coats must share with anyone
who has none; and whoever has
food must do likewise.” Even tax
collectors came to be baptized,
and they asked him, “Teacher,
what should we do?” He said to
them, “Collect no more than the
amount prescribed for you.” Sol-
diers also asked him, “And we,
what should we do?” He said to
them, “Do not extort money from
anyone by threats or false accu-
sation, and be satisfied with your
wages.”

As the people were filled with
expectation, and all were ques-
tioning in their hearts concern-
ing John, whether he might be
the Messiah, John answered all
of them by saying, “I baptize you
with water; but one who is more
powerful than I is coming; I am
not worthy to untie the thong of
his sandals. He will baptize you
with the Holy Spirit and fire. His
winnowing fork is in his hand, to
clear his threshing floor and to
gather the wheat into his granary;
but the chaff he will burn with un-
quenchable fire.” So, with many
other exhortations, he proclaimed
the good news to the people.

HEARING THE WORD

“Genuine Rejoicing”

The third Sunday of Advent is called “Gaudete Sunday”. “Gaudete”, which is Latin, means “Rejoice!” and the readings of the day focus on the theme of rejoicing. This overflowing of genuine joy or rejoicing, is not caused by the attainment of material prosperity, or the feeling of external security. Rather, this genuine joy results from eager anticipation of God’s salvation. This anticipation allows the believer to rejoice in God’s presence in their life, despite human pain and agony, loss and destruction.

The first reading from the book of the prophet Zephaniah contains a joyful victory song for Jerusalem. Zephaniah’s book is dominated by prophecies of doom against Jerusalem and all humankind. The prophet warns his people about the coming “Day of the Lord” – a terrifying day of cataclysmic destruction that will sweep away the pagan nations. It was also a day of judgment upon the unfaithful Israelites, who would suffer the same fate as idol worshipers. In his oracles Zephaniah issues stern warnings that Jerusalem and its inhabitants will be destroyed by their infidelity to God and by their adoption of Assyrian pagan worship.

Today’s first reading contains the ninth and final oracle from this prophetic

book. This oracle brings a significant change in tone and content – from the words of imminent doom to promises of salvation and restoration. The oracle begins with an invocation, “sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!”. With these words, the prophet invites the daughter of Zion, the personification of the city of Jerusalem, to shout for joy. But what is the reason for such rejoicing? As the text suggests, rejoicing is called for in view of the eventual restoration of the city. Having affirmed that the city will suffer darkness and destruction, the prophet speaks about a future without fear of enemies or threats of destruction of life and property. Furthermore, the Lord, “the king of Israel”, will return to Jerusalem. God’s presence amid his people will restore peace and harmony, casting out any fear of further disasters. The call for rejoicing, even in the shadow of impending doom, comes from the prophet’s sound knowledge and understanding of Israel’s God, who is not a God of vengeance, who would bring about the utter destruction of his people. This is the God who, after a time of reckoning and chastisement, will restore the people and reunite them with himself. Zephaniah shares this knowledge with his fellow Israelites and sets it out as the reason for true rejoicing.

In the second reading, Paul invites the believers

in Philippi to rejoice in the Lord. This invitation might come as a surprise, because Paul writes these words while languishing in prison. The letter to the Philippians is sometimes known as the “letter of joy” because of its gracious and optimistic tone. However, it must be noted that Paul wrote it while suffering imprisonment for the sake of the Gospel.

Despite his captivity and the danger to his life, Paul repeatedly and emphatically calls on his Christians to “rejoice in the Lord”. The reason for this joy is the nearness of the Lord. The natural reaction to the much awaited coming of the Lord, “the Parousia” could be one of anxiety and worry. But Paul believes that the Christian response to the coming of the Lord ought to be one of rejoicing. This overflow of rejoicing in the life of a Christian is the result of a deep and abiding relationship with Christ, that rises above trials, discords, anxieties and worries. That is why the phrase “in the Lord” is essential for understanding of Paul’s calls for rejoicing. This spirit of constant rejoicing leads to continual prayer and praising the Lord, “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” The result will be that “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” will guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Thus, rejoicing accompanied by prayer and praise is the appropriate Christian response to the Lord’s

coming that brings peace. Paul's own confidence while suffering in prison, certainly flowed from an ardent longing for the Lord's return.

The Gospel reading narrates the encounter between John the Baptist and the hearers of his message. John's proclamation is meant to prepare the people for Jesus' coming by a message of repentance and conversion. Like a true prophet, John used strong words to describe the judgment that will fall upon the stubborn and unrepentant. He describes Jesus as one whose "winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." These images might invoke fear, but the text underscores that only a transformed life can bring joy at the time of the Lord's coming. If there is no change, disaster will come. However, with the right response, the believer will await the Lord's coming with confidence and joy.

The text outlines this needed change, describing people from various walks of life - the crowds, the tax collectors and the soldiers. All of them came to seek out John, and to find out how they can prepare for welcoming the Messiah. John gives them specific advice for a genuine conversion of heart. He admonishes them to examine their relationships and behaviour towards the "others" in society. Though the content of his response to each group differs, the basic principle in his advice is the same. He

advocates a change of heart which will result in a change of lifestyle. Thus, the tax collectors are to refrain from overcharging the people for their personal gain; the soldiers are not to misuse their power through acts of extortion; the people are to share their surplus with the needy. There is a great sense of urgency in John's message, as he emphasizes that conversion must be expressed by its tangible fruits. There is no place here for pretence and deception. In the end, John's message is the "good news". It is a message of joy on anticipation of a changed world, a world which sees God's salvation approaching and making itself felt through the transformation of society.

The readings of this Sunday call for genuine rejoicing by identifying the root cause of rejoicing. Zephaniah invited his people to rejoice because God has their restoration at heart. In truth God always had had their restoration at heart even as they were going through a period of discord, strife, conflict and devastation. The apostle Paul makes an emphatic call to rejoice and to experience the gift of peace, even as he languishes in prison. He feels the Lord's presence, and anticipates the Parousia, the day of liberation and salvation, and the cause for ultimate joy. John the Baptist called for a change of heart and adoption of an other-centred lifestyle as a way to prepare oneself for the arrival of the promised Messiah and participation in the era of Messianic joy. The prophet Isaiah accu-

rately recognized that only the prospect of salvation can bring about a lasting and genuine joy in a human heart, as he states, "with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation".

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

With a sense of nostalgia, I recall the euphoria and outburst of joy in the square of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, on March 13, 2013, when white smoke emerged from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel, announcing to the world that a new pope has been chosen. It was a cold and wet evening with little drops of rain splashing on our umbrellas. With excitement, I pushed my way through the crowd and managed to get to the frontline, wanting to catch as close a glimpse as possible of the new pope. Not long afterwards the pope appeared on the balcony of the Basilica amidst rejoicing and cheers from all of us.

In today's liturgical celebration, the Church invites us to rejoice at the coming of someone much greater than the pope - the King of kings himself, Jesus Christ. Since his coming is near, the prophet Zephaniah proclaims, "rejoice and exult with all your heart" (Zep 3:14). St Paul adds his voice to the call for rejoicing when he says, "rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" (Phil 4:4).

Rejoicing comes naturally when things are going well - when I have enough food

to eat, clothes to wear, a safe place to lay my head, good health and good job. But, how do I rejoice when I lack these basic necessities? How do I rejoice when divorce stares me in the face, or when I lose a loved one? How can I rejoice when I am diagnosed with a serious medical condition? How is it possible to rejoice when I am robbed of my last penny?

The letter of Paul was not written from a five-star hotel but from a prison. Perhaps we can gain insight into how one can find joy even in prison by looking at the Gospel text anew. The message of John the Baptist was a call for a change of mind resulting in a change of action. What often robs us of joy is an unhealthy mindset. There is an African proverb which says, "it is not how much one has that brings joy but rather how much one gives." A similar proverb adds, "there is joy in making someone joyful." John the Baptist said to the crowd, "whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Yes, if you desire to be joyful seek to make others joyful.

Additionally, the mindset that does not accommodate the possibility of suffering will rob a person of joy in the face of any challenge. Following Jesus does not mean we will not have trials and tribulations. The practice of the virtue of hope is necessary to fill us with joy in spite of the challenges that beset us.

The proclamation of the Gospel by John the Baptist is a call to demolish any thought patterns that keep us far away from God. It is a call to develop new ways of thinking, and doing things, grounded in truth. Therefore, let us drop everything that robs us of joy, and entrust to Jesus all our cares and burdens.

PROVERB

*“There is
joy
in making
someone
joyful.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

What do I depend on for my happiness? Are these the lasting values and practices that come from my faith in Jesus?

When was the last time I made someone happy? Did that experience increase my personal happiness?

Response to God:

I turn to God in repentance, renouncing every form of selfishness and resolve to be more selfless in my dealings with others.

Response to your World:

In the course of this week I will look for at least one chance to make someone happy, either through sharing of some material goods or by a simple act of human kindness and care.

Inspired by the words of John the Baptist, we examine how our group can apply at least one element of John's teaching to our own situation.

PRAYER

*Eternal Father,
I thank you
for pouring so much joy
into my heart
as I await
the coming of your Son Jesus.
May your divine presence
keep me faithful
to the path of salvation,
and attentive to my task
of sharing the joy
of your coming with the world.
Amen.*